

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

March 11, 2021

1:34 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Grier Hopkins, Chair
Representative Ivy Spohnholz
Representative Harriet Drummond
Representative Sara Hannan
Representative Tom McKay
Representative Kevin McCabe
Representative Mike Cronk

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 63

"An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities; renaming the Alaska Marine Transportation Advisory Board the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board; relating to the membership and duties of the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

HOUSE BILL NO. 27

"An Act naming the irene Webber Bridge."

- MOVED HB 27 OUT OF COMMITTEE

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 63

SHORT TITLE: ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY OPERATIONS BOARD

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STUTES

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/15/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	TRA, STA
03/11/21	(H)	TRA AT 1:30 PM BARNES 124

BILL: HB 27

SHORT TITLE: NAMING IRENE WEBBER BRIDGE

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) STUTES

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	TRA
02/19/21	(H)	FIN REFERRAL ADDED AFTER TRA
02/19/21	(H)	BILL REPRINTED
03/11/21	(H)	TRA AT 1:30 PM BARNES 124

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE LOUISE STUTES

Legislator

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, presented HB 63.

KERRY CROCKER

Staff to Representative Louise Stutes

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Shared a PowerPoint and presented HB 63 on behalf of Representative Stutes, prime sponsor.

SARA PERMAN

Staff to Representative Louise Stutes

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented HB 27 on behalf of Representative Stutes, prime sponsor.

MICHAEL WEBBER

Son of irene Webber

representing self

Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered comments during the hearing of HB 27.

NANCY BIRD

representing self

Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered comments during the hearing of HB 27.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:34:13 PM](#)

CHAIR GRIER HOPKINS called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:34 p.m. Representatives Drummond, McCabe, Cronk, Spohnholz and Hopkins were present at the call to order. Representatives Hannan and McKay arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 63-ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY OPERATIONS BOARD

[1:36:42 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 63, "An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities; renaming the Alaska Marine Transportation Advisory Board the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board; relating to the membership and duties of the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board; and providing for an effective date."

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REPRESENTATIVE LOUISE STUTES, Legislator, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 63. Shared HB 63 would begin the process of filling the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS; "system") board with members who brought membership and planning experience as well as expertise. In addition to filling the board, HB 63 would shorten the long-term operations plan review time from five years to three years. Ideally, through the committee process, governance authority would be gained, she added.

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KERRY CROCKER, Staff to Representative Louise Stutes, Alaska State Legislature, introduced HB 63. Offering background information, Mr. Crocker shared the first ferry, the M/V Chilkat, started operating in 1957, before Alaska was a state. When Alaska became a state in 1959, the M/V Chilkat became Alaska's first state-owned ferry. That same year, Alaskans voted to approve an \$18 million-dollar bond to build four new ferries and docks throughout Alaska. By 1963, the AMHS was established. In 1984, Governor William Sheffield established an AMHS task force to assess the system's structure and rate system in the face of growing demand. It was determined the system was archaic and had a lack of continuity and purpose, and new

management was recommended. Without proper business structure in place, new boats were built throughout the 1960s and 70s, after which several decades passed with no construction of any ships.

MR. CROCKER put forth the reality that more than half the ships in the AMHS fleet were more than 40 or even 50 years old and required substantial maintenance costs. Slide 4 presented a 1989 memorandum from then-Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF) Commissioner Mark S. Hickey to then-Governor Steve Cowper, which acknowledged the system suffered greatly from overall lack of continuity and top management since its inception. The memo stated, "The combination of [our] inability to articulate the comprehensive system plan, and the real and perceived impacts resulting from the growing budget dilemma, has served as the primary impetus for many to support the establishment of a public authority as a way to address existing problems." This statement still held true in 2021, Mr. Crocker put forth.

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MR. CROCKER shared slide 3, which stated in 1984, the AMHS taskforce determined a change in management structure was needed to help provide business directive and success in the system; more than 30 years later, in 2016 under the AMHS Reform Initiative by Southeast Conference, McDowell Group, and Elliott Bay Design Group, it was determined new management was needed to invest in long-term planning and strategy. Finally, in 2020, Governor Mike Dunleavy commissioned a marine operations board, with members having the skills and experience of a ferry commission. The marine operations board would have the ability to assess, suggest marine business, enhance revenue, and reduce costs, while possessing the experience and knowledge of personnel management, service options, and ship maintenance. To this end, HB 63 would replace the current AMHS advisory board with a smaller nine-member operations board composed of the Marine Highway Director, two members appointed by the Speaker of the House, two members appointed by the Senate President, and four members appointed by the governor.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked about the motivation behind putting the head of the AMHS on the board.

MR. CROCKER said the thought was that if the director were on the board there would be buy-in, as the current advisory committee often made recommendations that were ignored.

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked if there may have been other ways of accomplishing that, and perhaps make the director an ex officio member who ensured recommendations did not go ignored, along with potentially putting some other accountability measures in statute.

MR. CROCKER replied yes.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked whether the House Speaker and Senate President would be appointing members from those bodies.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES replied no, they would be members of the public who had AMHS, DOT&PF, or business experience.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked whether legislators would be on the board and if one-year terms were mentioned because of transition time.

MR. CROCKER replied yes, transitions from existing board could take one year.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE said he thought it aligned with legislators since it said those appointed by the speaker.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES said it did need clarification, and [members would come from public sector because] they did not wish to make [choosing board members] a "political football."

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CHAIR HOPKINS asked how the governor's version differed from HB 63.

MR. CROCKER replied major differences were who chose the boards and the board's terms: in the governor's version two members were appointed to a one-year, two to a two-year, two to a three-year, two to a four-year, and two to a five-year term. There was also included in the governor's version a short-term operations plan.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES added the other difference in his version the governor would appoint all members.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE commented similarly to the Police Advisory Council's being stacked with retired police officers, the AMHS board may soon become stacked with union members.

MR. CROCKER replied the intent of HB 63 was to include only one union member, which was already in statute.

[1:52:30 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS said the governor's plan had a three-year and five-year version and asked whether HB 63 updating only every three years offered enough flexibility.

REPRESENTATIVE STUTES replied three years was a good amount of time to see the progress the AMHS was making as it allowed the chance to address problems before problems took hold.

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CHAIR HOPKINS announced that HB 63 would be set aside.

[1:53:56 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 1:53 p.m. to 1:55 p.m.

HB 27-NAMING IRENE WEBBER BRIDGE

[1:55:13 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 27, "An Act naming the irene Webber Bridge."

[1:55:27 PM](#)

SARA PERMAN, Staff to Representative Louise Stutes, Alaska State Legislature, introduced HB 27, which would rename Bridge 406, Scott Glacier No. 6 on the Copper River Highway, to the irene Webber Bridge, in memory of the longtime Cordovan whose leadership and vision inspired Cordova's running community.

MS. PERMAN shared irene Webber, an Alutiig woman born in Ellamar, Alaska, near Tatitlek, and later moving with her family to Cordova, was the owner of a seining operation and founder of the Cordova Running Club, being remembered as the first sole participant in Cordova's inaugural King Salmon Marathon in 1986. Ms. Perman noted that irene was not a lifelong runner, coming to the sport as an adult. With her boundless enthusiasm, irene built that same marathon into the annual Alaska Salmon Runs. After 34 years, the Alaska Salmon Runs now boasts five different athletic events: The King Salmon Marathon, Sockeye Half-Marathon, Coho 10K, Humpy 5K and the Smooth One Mile Fun Run. The races have become a part of a renowned sporting event that sees almost 300 participants each year from around the state.

MS. PERMAN shared irene was also responsible for founding the Cordova 2x2 Cancer Walk. The annual walk raised money to support Cordova cancer patients. Since its establishment in 2002, the event has raised more than \$100,000 to assist Cordovans with cancer screenings or treatment expenses. In addition to her contributions to the Cordova running community, irene selflessly volunteered her time to other philanthropic efforts, supporting St. Jude's Children's Hospital, The American Cancer Society and S.I.D.S. Ride-A-Thon. irene passed away in 2018. She is remembered fondly by many. With the passing of this legislation, her contributions will continue to be memorialized by the Cordova community.

MS. PERMAN noted the small "i" would be used as that is how irene signed her name. DOT had been briefed on this, she noted. Family suggested the bridge with its view of Scott Glacier which overlooked the "Nine Mile Sand Pile," a popular gathering place, for irene's bridge. She pointed out that the King Salmon Marathon and Sockeye Half-Marathon would also go over this bridge.

MS. PERMAN pointed out the fiscal note which included \$10K from the DOT&PF for signage.

[1:59:59 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN looked to confirm DOT&PF being fine with lower case "i."

MS. PERMAN replied yes.

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked whether the sign manufacturer signed off on that as well.

MS. PERMAN noted HB 27 was specifically drafted with the constituent's request specifying the lower-case "i."

[2:01:15 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK voiced support for HB 27.

[2:01:36 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE also voiced support but asked whether it was possible to repurpose some materials to cut down on material costs.

CHAIR HOPKINS replied finance committee may be able to address it.

[2:02:52 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS opened public testimony on HB 27.

[2:03:12 PM](#)

MICHAEL WEBBER, Son of irene Webber, representing self, spoke in support of HB 27. Shared his mother irene, a "little Alaska Native lady with a big heart," spoke what was on her mind, which empowered folks in Cordova and gave them focus. He added much of this was in terms of sobriety as irene spent over half her life celebrating sobriety. She made a stand and had a voice and a kind heart, which she used to reach out to others, helping them in their difficult times. She changed her addiction from drinking to running, which empowered her to the level it helped her create the races, all named after species of fish in honor of the fishing town. The runs brought the community together, only getting stronger over time, Mr. Webber said. irene, a commercial fisherman, was passionate and it came through in many ways, he stated. He added she had been helping with the American Cancer Society since the 1970s.

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MR. WEBBER said seeing his mother's name on a bridge would be an honor for his family and for the community. She had many children and grandchildren as well as followers in sobriety, he stated. It would bring pride to those friends and family members, he shared. She was a hero in many ways, he said.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ commented it was inspiring that a woman in long-term recovery had gone on to become such a role model. She added it was fitting to discuss in March, which was sobriety awareness month. She thanked the bill sponsor and Mr. Webber.

[2:09:42 PM](#)

CHAIR HOPKINS asked the story was with the small "i."

MR. WEBBER replied it was part of her personality; she had used a small "i" since the 1960s and had achieved Power of Attorney.

[2:10:59 PM](#)

NANCY BIRD, representing self, spoke in support of HB 27. A good friend of irene's, Ms. Bird added the little "i" represented Ms. Webber's belief people shouldn't be too projecting of themselves; people didn't need to be talked about so much. As the editor of Cordova Times in 80s, she shared an anecdote that irene had really enjoyed an April Fools' issue over which others had gotten upset. She expressed her support and said there should be no problem with the little "i."

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CHAIR HOPKINS closed public testimony on HB 27.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN moved to report HB 27 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes.

[2:13:53 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 2:13 p.m. to 2:16 p.m.

[2:16:35 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:17 p.m.